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ATTENTION AND INTEREST¹

BY WILLIAM H. BURNHAM

It was said by the older psychologists, and is repeated to-day, that attention depends upon interest. Nobody denies the truth of this statement, but it is a survival of a psychology fast becoming obsolete. It is equally true and quite as important that interest depends upon attention. The word interest, as everybody knows, is used in two senses:—first, as practically all psychologists agree, it denotes a complex state of feeling; second, it denotes a permanent mental possession—as when we say a man has an interest in art, or literature, or music, or the like. What is meant is that one has a store of associations related to these subjects, that he is in the habit of attending to them; or better, as an essential element in attention is preperception, that one has a permanent habit of preperception in such subjects. These two meanings of the word interest are as different as they can well be—the one a temporary affective state, the other a permanent habit of preperception. But, as it seems, even in our standard psychologies these two uses of the word are often confused. Fortunately, perhaps, for the preservation of my friendships time is lacking for concrete illustration.

If the word interest is used in the latter sense, to signify a permanent habit of preperception, nobody will deny that attention depends upon interest; but this is merely saying that our present preperception depends upon our past habits of preperception. If, however, by interest is meant the affective state, it is not in harmony with modern psychology to say that attention depends upon interest. Psychologists are coming apparently more and more to the view that every reaction of the organism contributes its increment, however infinitesimal, to the affective life of the individual. The organic adjustments in the case of attention are no exception. They contribute their increment of feeling. The resulting affective state is interest.

All writers are agreed that physical reactions of varied character are the necessary conditions of attention; all agree that interest is an affective state. Modern investigation has amply demonstrated the physiological conditions of attention, sensory, motor, vasomotor, circulatory, respiratory, visceral. Why

¹ This paper is printed substantially as presented at the Cambridge meeting of the American Psychological Association, Dec., 1905.

should not this organic adjustment be correlated with an affective state of consciousness? What is this affective state but interest? The theory I would present is simply this: The feeling of the organic adjustment in attention is the interest. Attention is a fundamental reaction of the whole organism, comparable to the tropisms of plants and animals. As Professor Royce puts it: "Whoever is persistently attentive is expressing an attitude of the organism which has the essential character of the now frequently mentioned tropisms."¹ The correlative of this is interest. Whenever we turn attention to a subject, we have a feeling called interest. While it might be vain to attempt to show the primacy of one or the other of these correlatives, the facts, in the writer's opinion, are described more accurately by saying that interest depends upon attention than by saying that attention depends upon interest.

This, it may be said, is a mere theory, what is there to demonstrate it? This is a fair question. The answer is that it cannot be demonstrated. But what is the opposite doctrine but a mere theory? It has been assumed, but no one has attempted to demonstrate it. If the primacy of either is to be asserted, the presumption is in favor of the theory that interest depends upon attention. Why should interest stand alone without physical cause, when other affective states are correlated with physical reactions? On the other hand, why should not the organic changes involved, as everybody knows, in attention, the so-called conditions of attention, have their mental correlative in some such affective state as interest? Stated in this way the theory suggested can be held by psychologists with widely different views of feeling. Stated as before,—the feeling of the organic adjustment is the interest,—it is practically a corollary from the Lange-James theory of emotion. In my opinion quite as good a case can be made for the latter as applied to the subtle feeling of interest as in the case of the coarser emotions.

This view of interest has been approximated or anticipated by a number of psychologists, among them, if I mistake not, Prof. Titchener, and Prof. Dewey, and of course by all those who identify attention and interest. Of the last mentioned theory Miss Calkins has given an excellent statement. She rightly says that a thing attended to is interesting, and she makes interest and attention synonymous. We may, I think, carry our psychological analysis a little farther. Even "what God has joined together" psychology is sometimes justified in separating. The relation of attention to interest is such a case. And if for no better reason than to protest against the

¹Outlines of Psychology, p. 329.

prevailing confusion of the psychology of attention, it would be well to emphasize the organic adjustment as the basis of interest and feeling, and attention as primary.¹

With this view of interest, the traditional conundrums are explained quite as well as by any other. The pages of the older psychologies were enlivened by thrilling stories of certain orators who, in the passion of eloquent gesticulation, severely wounded their hands on desk or pulpit, but remained unconscious of the fact until their effort was over. The theory here suggested, together with the well-known law of the relativity of feeling, offers a plausible enough explanation of such cases. The intense interest caused by the orator's intense attention so filled consciousness that the pain was excluded; the interest was the stronger affective state. Afterwards, when the orator's intense attention ceased, the interest ceased also, and the pain of the wound was felt.

It has been something of a psychological puzzle that attention weakens feeling. There is no question that it does. If one gives close attention to a pain, for example, the pain is appreciably diminished, and illustrations have been furnished by experiments in the laboratory. Kuelpe states this effect upon the feelings as follows: "While pleasure and pain are brought far more vividly to consciousness by concentration of attention upon their concomitant sensations, they disappear entirely if we succeed (and we can succeed only for a moment) in making the feeling as such the object of attentive observation."² Now, if the feeling we call interest is the result of attention, then by the very act of giving attention to a pain we arouse a new feeling that on account of the limitations of consciousness and the law of relativity weakens the former painful feeling; and, if this attention and its concomitant interest are sufficiently intense, they may submerge the pain altogether.

It is often said that interest is contagious. This is a very pretty metaphor and it has long done service in psychology, but no one has isolated the bacillus of interest that causes the contagion, although psychologists seem to have been satisfied with the metaphor. Dropping the figure let us ask how the interest spreads. The following simple hypothesis seems to accord with the facts. One person becomes interested. His

¹ Since presenting the above paper before the American Psychological Association, the writer has noted the statement by Prof. Pillsbury, which he had not read at the time: "Things are only interesting because we turn our attention to them, but we do not turn our attention to them because they are interesting." But as I understand the context, he does not acknowledge the relation of interest to attention involved in this statement. *L'Attention*. Paris, 1906. pp. 72.

² *Psychology*, p. 430.

enthusiasm *suggests* in obvious as well as subtle ways that the subject is worth giving attention to. Forthwith others imitate his example and attend to it, and interest follows as the result, first the affective state, then the habit of preperception.

Probably a similar theory accounts in whole or in part for the well-known fact that we are often interested in the disagreeable or the painful; for the spread of fads in a community; for the fact that intense attention often hinders perception and action; for anæsthesia due to hypnotic suggestion, etc.

To résumé briefly: The word interest as we have noted is used in two senses: 1st, to denote our permanent habits of preperception; 2nd, to represent a temporary affective state complex in character. Attention is a reaction of the whole organism, comparable to the tropisms of plants and animals. We must suppose an affective state correlated with this reaction. This affective state is interest. The least we can say in this case is that interest is correlated with attention.

While with legitimate heedlessness we may continue to use the popular phraseology in regard to attention and interest—just as we say the sun rises and sets—in our special psychology of attention it is misleading to teach that attention depends upon interest. If we use the word interest in the sense of a permanent habit of preperception, what we mean is that our attention of the moment as preperception depends on our habits of preperception; but if that is our meaning, we should say so. If, however, we use the word interest in the other sense, meaning the affective state of the moment correlated with attention, to say that attention depends upon interest is not in harmony with modern psychology.

Not only the popular use of the words interest and attention but our psychological usage as well, are misleading survivals of an obsolete psychology. In pedagogy this usage has led to much confusion and error. There are actually two opposing camps—those who believe in the moral value of the uninteresting, and those who believe in the pedagogical value of the interesting. It is said by one side that only by giving attention to the uninteresting can the power of voluntary attention be developed. It is said by the other that only when interest is appealed to can a child's attention be gained. To attempt a reconciliation would be a case of crying peace! peace! when there is no conflict. Both are largely right: for so far as interest means preperception, attention is impossible without it; the child's mind can no more give attention to the absolutely uninteresting in this sense than the eye can perceive the ultra-violet rays of the spectrum; while so far as interest means feeling it is bound to come any way when attention is actually turned to an object.

Of course, any such account of the processes of attention and interest does injustice to the complexity of the actually existing mental states. The process of preperception determines not merely the aspects of an object to which we attend, but to a great extent the intensity and coloring of the affective state, that is, the interest in this sense. That this may occur in a short circuited manner, the preperceptive images being associated with affective states, or if one prefer, they themselves having an emotional coloring, there seems no reason to deny.

The view here presented has been stated with somewhat arbitrary simplicity. If to some the whole matter seems too obvious to be worth presenting, and if to others it seems reactionary, this may be an illustration of what has been said of the prevailing confusion in the use of the word interest.